

Preflight Yo

By LCdr. Chris E. Taylor,
VAQ-133

Having just returned from a joint-strike mission in South Korea, I knew I had enough time to work out before a Friday afternoon hail and farewell with the Marines. It was a warm, sunny day, with a light breeze.

Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan, has a nice road that encompasses the base, winding past the runways, along the seawall, by the gym, and back to the BOQ. Although I've spent most of my life running, I just had "discovered" bike riding. The perimeter road provided a great workout—aerobic, outdoors, wind-in-the-face, sightseeing, and it got you where you were going. In only a few weeks, I was riding at a fast pace, probably about 20 mph. With little traffic on base, it seemed like a safe place to work out.

Few military people own cars in Iwakuni; instead, you usually buy a bike from someone who is leaving. I had purchased a 10-speed for about \$20. It wasn't new by any means—the tires showed it had covered some miles—but it seemed reliable. I had one of the local bike "experts" look it over and adjust the brakes. As I soon would learn, though, my Friday afternoon, high-speed workout was doomed.

Wham! Suddenly, a dark, sharp pain ripped into the left side of my face, accompanied by my seeing stars. A strong, dull pain followed, and I was on the ground rolling around, with my hand covering my face. I had a feeling I'll never forget—and one I never again want to experience.

The front wheel of my 10-speed had come off, and I had hit the ground on my left cheek and lower forehead. Blood was everywhere—on my clothes, on the asphalt, and on my shoes. Because I'm a pilot, I instinctively

checked my eyes; they were OK, or at least the images were clear. A Japanese man running along the perimeter road where I had crashed flagged down a van, and they took me to an emergency room on base.

The next day, I was in the Naval Hospital, Yokosuka, and two days later, I was in Okinawa, where I had a 10-hour surgery by a team of five experts. They repaired the shattered bones in my forehead, as well as my broken cheekbone and the bones that make up the floor of my left eye socket. Because of the injury to my eye socket and displacement of the eye, I had double vision for quite some time. To repair my forehead, the surgeons used a titanium plate to hold the bones in place. I then had more X-rays and CAT scans than I could count. Two weeks after my surgery in Okinawa, I went home to recuperate—and to get used to the scars on my face that I'll have for the rest of my life.

What happened? The potholes and drainage grates on the road I was using had loosened the nuts and bolts attaching the bicycle's front wheel to the forks. A particularly large bump was enough to separate the wheel from the forks (*see accompanying photos*). I'll never know how tight the nuts and bolts were before I started my workout, but a preflight check of the bike might have ensured my well-being.

Newer bikes have small ridges at the end of the forks to prevent mishaps like the one I had. Wearing a helmet also could have helped, especially a full-face model. Today's helmets ride too high on the head to have done me much good, but I'll always wear one in the future.

What did I learn from this misadventure? A few minutes of the same attention to detail

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that we use on an aircraft preflight can be just as important during PT and recreation time. If you're riding a bicycle, check the tires, the chain, the handlebars, the brakes, and, yes, the wheels. Also make sure you have all the prescribed personal-protective equipment. The few seconds you spend taking those precautions can save you a lot of pain--and possibly your career or your life. ■

The author was assigned to VAQ-134 when this incident happened.

